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To: **Appropriations Committee**

From: **Susan Walkama, LCSW**  
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**Wheeler Clinic, Inc.**

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Re: **Testimony on FY 10 Mid-Term Budget Adjustments**  
**Department of Children and Families Budget**

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My name is Susan Walkama. I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of Wheeler Clinic, Inc. Wheeler Clinic is a large behavioral health, special education and prevention services provider serving over 30,000 individuals each year. Our services are based in central Connecticut, greater Hartford, and Waterbury with some service capacity in New Haven and a few statewide programs. We receive funding from the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Court Support Services, Department of Social Services and the Department of Public Health. We provide an integrated system of care for children, families and adults that diverts unnecessary stays in inpatient settings and residential care. Our annual budget is \$47,000,000 and we have over 750 employees.

I am here today asking you to maintain the funding in the Department of Children and Families budget for the Short Term Treatment and Assessment Residential Service (STAR) program and the Hartford area Enhanced Care Coordination program. STAR is designed to provide short-term clinical diagnostic and treatment services within a highly structured, supportive, community-centered and family-focused program. The 12-bed facility is located in Hartford, serving children between the ages of seven and twelve who experience serious emotional problems, trauma histories and highly difficult behaviors for their families to manage. Most of these children are recently discharged from inpatient psychiatric care and are at risk of needing an out-of-home placement in a residential setting. Without this program, most children referred would require residential care in or outside of Connecticut.

The goal of the STAR program is to provide an intensive, yet supportive course of treatment that will stabilize the child's emotional problems while keeping the child close to family, friends, relatives and other existing supports. STAR has a home-like atmosphere that promotes a sense of stability, security, comfort, and positive change. The program staff is trained in evidence-based approaches to care, including Risking Connection, Restorative Practices and Life Space Crisis Intervention. Most children are ready to return home in 3 to 4 months, while the average residential stay is 9 to 12 months. The community-based design of the program coupled with a focus on intensive family intervention, lends itself to briefer lengths of stay than is typical for residential programs. Children who are placed at STAR remain in their community schools; this allows them to remain connected to their existing community supports, provides less disruption in their lives, and helps them to successfully transition back home. The model is one that truly embraces the strength of the community through individualized, culturally sensitive programming, inter-agency collaboration, and collaborative goal-oriented treatment.

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## ► STAR PROGRAM

### *Juan's Story*

Juan is an 8-year old in the DCF foster care system with a history of multiple hospitalizations, behavioral, emotional and psychiatric issues and disruptions from foster homes. His future seemed bleak; he distrusted people and had no family to call his own. He lost his parents at age three due to severe neglect due to their long-standing addiction to drugs. He came to STAR when the plans for a pre-adoptive family fell through. In addition to intensive clinical care, the program clinician reconnected with his pre-adoptive family and worked with them to reconsider the adoption.

With a lot of work and support from the program, Juan was ready to return home to his pre-adoptive family. The STAR staff continued to provide supports for the family once Juan returned to his new home and coordinated with other community providers to insure a smooth transition. A year after his discharge from STAR, Juan has experienced many changes: he has had no hospitalizations, was promoted to 4th grade and has a new last name. He was adopted two months ago and finally has the permanency he deserves.

It would cost the state \$64,000 for a residential treatment stay for Juan and an additional \$20,000-\$40,000 to pay for the child's educational services. It cost the state \$31,000 for Juan's four-month stay at STAR. Juan attended his local community school at no additional expense to the state. The STAR program saves an average of \$63,000 per admission as compared to residential treatment costs.

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## ► HARTFORD ENHANCED CARE COORDINATION

The Enhanced Care Coordination program serves children in DCF care placed in residential treatment facilities. Enhanced Care Coordinators are Wheeler Clinic community-based clinicians who work side by side with DCF workers to bring children and youth back home from residential treatment settings. This program has successfully transitioned 293 Hartford area children and youth from residential services back to their home communities and families. The Enhanced Care Coordinators must overcome multiple barriers and challenges that often prevent timely and efficient return to community based care.

### *Rwanda's Story*

Rwanda grew up in a home where her caretakers abused alcohol and drugs and her parents abandoned her at an early age. As a teen, she ran away from home, disobeyed rules and abused drugs. She could no longer be controlled by her grandmother. She was placed in a residential treatment setting and for the first six months of her stay little discharge planning took place. Rwanda was depressed, lonely, grieving and pessimistic about her future. At this point, the Enhanced Care Coordinator was asked to intervene to assist in creating a community based discharge plan. Within several months, a foster care services, outpatient substance abuse treatment and a mentor were arranged. Rwanda is now in high school and enjoying the music program, especially Jazz dance. The Enhanced Care Coordinator was able to facilitate ongoing, meaningful contact with her biological family. This helped to reduce Rwanda feelings of grief, loss and loneliness. She is now living a safe, stable life in the community and looks forward to her future.

It costs the state a minimum of \$200 plus educational expense for one day of residential. The Hartford Enhanced Care Coordination program has a total annualized cost of \$252,144 and a cost of \$21.55 per child per day.

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We need to do the right thing. We must provide desperately needed high quality services to our children and reduce state spending. By maintaining STAR and Hartford Enhanced Care Coordination we do both. Thank you for listening and I would be happy to answer questions.